

Marc Porter Magee, ConnCAN, Appropriations Committee Hearing, February 16, 2010

My name is Marc Porter Magee. I am the Chief Operating Officer for the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now. ConnCAN is building a movement of concerned citizens advocating to fundamentally reform our public schools through smart public policies.

I testify today about public charter schools. Other advocates will speak to you about the breakthrough results these schools are achieving – they are truly closing the achievement gap.

I would like to talk to you about how those gap-busting schools are funded. We are gratified that the legislature voted last year to fund the seats needed to avoid the tragedy of half-completed charter schools. And when it comes to per-pupil funding, we understand the need, in tough budget times like these, to flat-fund public schools of all kinds, including charters, as the Governor's budget proposes.

But because Connecticut's charter schools are funded at 75 cents on the dollar compared to traditional public schools, flat-funding is especially severe for charters. And with the federal Race to the Top this year, up to \$200 million in funding for Connecticut public schools hinges, in part, on fairly funding our charter schools.

As you may know, the State Board of Education recognized the need to fix charter school funding -- recommending that the Governor increase charter school funding by \$1,000 per pupil, but the Governor did not incorporate that increase into her budget.

It might surprise you to hear us say it, but we don't think the State Board's recommendation is a good idea. Not because charter schools don't need the funding, but rather because an extra \$5 million this year won't actually solve the fundamental problem, nor will it satisfy the demands of Race to the Top, which requires that charter schools have to have equal access to local, as well as state and federal, resources. We believe there's a better answer.

Connecticut is one of just three states in the union – along with Hawaii and Rhode Island – that fund charter schools through an annually appropriated line item.

What's more, taxpayers are paying to educate the same students twice: At the same time that public charter schools only receive about 75 percent of per-pupil funding that districts receive, Connecticut pays districts more than \$186 million a year for students they no longer educate because they are sent to charter schools, magnet schools and technical schools.

Charter school advocates come to you every year with hat in hand and with kids paraded in front of you to ask for funding. This year, we come with that same problem, but also with a solution. As the testimony we submitted lays out to you in detail, a new long-term sustainable system of funding for charter schools where money follows the child to their school of choice would eliminate the charter school line item and bring them on par with other public school students – avoiding the 75 percent inequity. This system requires no immediate money from the state or districts, the transition to it could be funded with winnings from the Race to the Top, and it will save the state tens of millions over several years.

Our existing system is too expensive for the state, too uncertain for charter school parents and students, and too much of a barrier to growth for these schools.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today about the problem of unequal funding for Connecticut's public charter schools and the solution that can fix it.